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Professionalization *in vivo*: Graduate Students on Facebook

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This study describes how doctoral students make use of Facebook as a professional academic tool rather than just a social network. A social networking site (SNS) primarily seen either as a plaything or a cultural cesspit—better for sharing pictures with grandma or biased news articles with friends—Facebook also opens up opportunities for graduate students to access networks of scholars, learn to inhabit academic roles, and gain entrance to professional communities. These activities are part of the students' professionalization: the process by which young or pre-professionals learn to adopt values, norms, and skills as they join professional communities. Much more than on-the-job training and learning where the best parking is or when to pick up the tab, professionalization is a normative process whereby individuals learn to understand work beyond particular job duties in a single institution—it is engaging with and behaving as a member of a culture. The methods and practices involved in this kind of "enculturation of the individual into a system of practice" (Polin, 2010, p. 164) has long been a topic in writing studies (Miller, Brueggemann, Blue, & Shepherd, 1997; Ebest, 1999; McNabb, 2001), but researchers are only just beginning to examine the role of social media in the professionalization process.

Researchers in composition, computers and writing, and technical communication have begun to explore social networking sites' value for professionalization and mentoring. SNSes such as Facebook are powerful interpersonal communication tools (Pigg, 2014) as well as spaces where participants experiment with and establish identity (Buck, 2012). Even more, Facebook, Twitter, and other sites have become significant tools graduate students and academics employ to manage their own professionalization. Leon and Pigg (2011) have focused on graduate students' use of social media to perform theoretical concepts they learn about and to understand various writing roles they must inhabit, while Coad (2017) described how graduate students used Twitter backchannels at conferences to make a name for themselves in the field. Faris and Moore (2017) argued that engaging through social media is risky—fraught with complexity and tension as young professionals navigate public and private networks, careers, and communication. Contemporary users are familiar with social networking sites being fraught with frustrating political and social exchanges, a result of overlap and collapse of boundaries that typifies networked

public life. Still, Faris and Moore remind us that engaging on social media is also "increasingly important for success and sustenance" (p. 54), a point reflected in the interviews I will report on. Adding to that larger conversation, this study emphasizes the special importance social media holds for students in distance programs, who may not feel like they have the same opportunity to access to professional academic community and culture as face-to-face students.

Distance learning is becoming an increasingly important and popular mode of delivery for graduate schools. According to Digital Learning Compass' 2017 *Distance Education Enrollment Report,* both public and private nonprofit universities have shown consistent enrollment growth in graduate distance programs since 2012[1]. As graduate degrees delivered entirely online grow in number, where does professional enculturation occur? Professional enculturation occurs in myriad locations and various contexts: conversations with other graduate students; shared work and study spaces; service as research assistants or collaborators; observations of faculty interactions and performance in committee, service, and scholarly work; the impromptu office drop-in; social gatherings like the department Christmas party; meetings to go over that IRB draft just one more time; or conversations and academic behaviors seen and heard in hallways and public spaces. These experiences make up a kind of ambient, tacit experience. Such experience—generally provided by residence requirements but potentially missing from online programs—not only reinforces the norms, expectations, and behaviors of disciplines, but also enculturates graduate students by giving them a space in which to practice being professional academics. The open path to education afforded by online programs comes with a risk: potential lack of access to the people responsible for helping students inhabit new roles.

My purpose in this study is to highlight the ways in which graduate students deploy Facebook as a tool for cultivating professional networks and engage in self-sponsored moments of professionalism and mentoring. Reporting on the results of eight interviews with graduate students and recent Ph.D.s from online and face-to-face programs, I describe graduate students' use of Facebook as a professional and academic tool rather than just a social experience. Findings are oriented around four major themes: 1) their range of overall attitudes about social media, 2) the multiple education-related purposes for which they deployed Facebook, 3) their experiences using Facebook for professional development and mentoring, and 4) their feelings

[1] According to data from the U. S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), from 2012-2015, graduate distance enrollments increased by 18.1% at public and private non-profit institutions. Over the same time, undergraduate distance enrollments increased by 9.6%; this growth was exclusively at public and non-profit schools; private for-profit enrollments fell over the same period (Allen & Seaman, 2017). NCES reported that in 2011-2012, 18% of graduate students in the U.S. were enrolled in entirely online programs, and 36% of graduate students took at least one distance education class (Kena et al, 2016*).*

about mixing personal and professional networks. Participants' comments made clear that social networking sites mediated graduate school for online and face-to-face students alike. However, for distance students Facebook played an especially valuable role in opening access to their program and institution, helping them develop professional identities, navigate the complexities of their discipline, and gain agency as scholars. For all of the distance Ph.D. students in this study, Facebook augmented their graduate education in powerful, positive ways.

Social Media & Professionalization

Social media—and social networking sites in particular—are much more than spaces where writers can practice writing to different and multiple audiences. The constructivist, collaborative nature of these sites make them valuable for professionalization, and they have been used to augment existing graduate student communities, making visible the networked, rather than solely isolated, nature of academic work. Digital spaces do more than simply mediate multi-author projects: they highlight the value of maintaining and building collaborative relationships (Ridolfo et al, 2011, p. 135). Eyman, Sheffield, and DeVoss (2010) called for academics to take advantage of networking tools like blogs, wikis, and social networking websites to show that learning to create knowledge in disciplinary communities—learning to be a scholar—occurs in collaborative, supportive, and facilitative networks, even when we conform to the "fiction of the originary genius" (p. 49). The research networks they described—which mixed online and face-to-face interactions—fostered legitimate community, taught skills, and developed critical engagement that graduate students need to learn to engage rigorously in their profession (p. 56).

Social media sites' most important function may be making relationships and entire networks visible. Buck (2012) has shown how social networking sites are woven into everyday life; these networked digital environments profoundly shape users' experiences and are core literacy spaces for the people that use them. As they shape profiles and write to interact with others, users continually and very literally author themselves into being (Brooke, 2009). This sort of constructed social self is not specific to digital social networks, but an important factor of those networks is that they "not only promote decentered exchange but also frequently make social and intertextual connections visible and immediate, and indicate where relationships might exist" (Pigg, 2014, p. 70). That is, the network is not simply a metaphor, but observable in lists, profile descriptions, and typed, threaded conversations. Network visualization of this kind plays an important role in graduate students' process of professionalization—an increasingly important role for graduate students educated in fully online and low-residency programs. By watching members of professional networks engage on social networking sites, these students are able to see community norms, activities, and professional roles—nuances that are not revealed in online class interactions.

In order to become knowledge makers, graduate students depend on tacit

professionalizing moments, collaborative experiences, and established, sustained relationships with mentors through a variety of interactions. These moments have predominantly been fulfilled by face-to-face residence requirements but seem to be impossible to replicate in distance education programs (Davis, Harding, & Mascle, 2010). Although synchronous class meetings can go "a very long way" (p. 308) toward alleviating asynchronous coursework's lack of physical space, a sizeable gap still remains: how do distance students professionalize? With this issue in mind, I take up the following research questions:

- What social, educational, and professional roles do digital social networks play for graduate students, both in traditional residential programs and fully online and low-residency programs?
- In what ways do digital social networks help mitigate the physical gap produced by distance graduate education?

Methods

Participants and recruitment

To recruit participants for this IRB-approved study, I made a broad call for participants on Facebook through groups such as WPA-GO, as well as through disciplinary LISTSERVS such as WPA-L. One problem with the literature on professionalization, as Leon and Pigg (2011) pointed out, is that horror stories are more abundant than research studies, and "there are few stories about how graduate students approach the problems and tensions of professionalizing" (p. 5). To get a variety of perspectives on social media use, I adopted some of Leon and Pigg's methodological choices about sampling and interview methods and attempted to gather responses that represented different distribution points in graduate study.

From a large pool of respondents, I selected eight individuals in an attempt to look across an array of program modalities and stages in their degree and professionalization process. Participants included recent Ph.D. graduates within one year of completion, doctoral candidates, and one doctoral student at the beginning of his program. I also selected one participant from an Ed.D. program, in order to compare her responses to the other participants, all in Ph.D. programs in rhetoric or writing studies. I was interested in discussing the experiences of online and traditional programs, so I selected participants that represented a range of modalities; I interviewed three individuals from fully online programs, two with a hybrid program, and three from traditional, face-to-face programs.

As shown in Table 1, these participants, identified with pseudonyms, came from a range of academic positions, programs, and disciplines. The small number of participants in this study is not without limitations: only two different online graduate programs are represented in the sample, while four traditional programs are represented. Also, because some of the respondents had recently completed their degree and were speaking retrospectively, including data from time-use diaries (see

Hart-Davidson, 2007) was not feasible. Although limited in scale, the findings do point to interesting contrasts in the experiences and social media usage patterns of face-to-face with online graduate students. A description of the experiences of these eight participants also provides a set of baseline narratives upon which future scholarship might expand.

Table 1: Participant Profiles

Pseudonym	**Steve**	**Jason**	**Rene**	**Dave**	**Claire**	**Robert**	**Veronica**	**Caitlin**
Status	PhD Student	PhD Graduate	PhD Candidate	PhD Graduate	PhD Candidate	PhD Graduate	EdD Candidate	PhD Candidate
Field	English, Tech, & Media	Technical Communication	Technical Communication	Technical Communication	Technical Communication	Comp & Rhetoric	Higher Ed	Rhetoric & Writing
Program Modality	Online	Online	Online	Hybrid	Hybrid	Traditional	Traditional	Traditional

Data collection and analysis

Interviews were conducted via Skype instant messaging and were 45-90 minutes in length. Interview questions (see Appendix A) attempted to 1) establish participants' experiences with social media and education in general as well as 2) gather details of their experiences using social media for educational or professionalizing purposes as a graduate student or junior faculty member. During these semi-structured conversations, I used an interview script to invite participants to talk broadly about their attitudes toward and purposes for social networking, following up in the moment with more specific questions about social media in coursework, collaboration, professional identity, and mentoring. Interview questions also encouraged participants to talk about their level of engagement and sense of culture or community in their programs. Since interviews took place via text, no transcription was necessary. After archiving the Skype chats in text format and removing identifying data, I deleted these chats from my messaging history.

In his *Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, Saldaña (2013) pointed out that there is no final authority or "best way" to analyze qualitative data, an approach that is similar to Koerber and McMichael's 2008 discussion of sampling in technical communication research. Any approach to coding and analysis must be rhetorical and iterative. Using qualitative coding methods rooted in an emic approach (Black, 1980), I analyzed and coded descriptively, forming *in vivo* codes by looking for common terms emerging from the data to gather as themes (Saldaña, 2013) and then returning to the data in multiple passes to look for places where the data pushed back against those themes. Since my interview questions encouraged participants to reflect on roles,

purposes, and tensions in graduate professionalization, I paid specific attention to participants' descriptions of their experiences with Facebook and the particular roles of this SNS in their graduate experiences.

Findings

Relying on the ability of social networks to establish presence, most of the participants in this study reported rich moments of professional development and mentoring at some point in their education. For all interview participants, Facebook use in particular circumscribed their experiences of graduate school, and was a valued source of agency for multiple purposes, whether doing research or keeping tabs on a cohort, writing group, or advisor. These findings reveal that although these individuals' specific attitudes towards social media vary and tension between professional and personal networking does exist, in general participants remained positive about social networks, actively deploying them to understand and engage with their profession. Participants from distance graduate programs in particular felt that their graduate experience would have been fundamentally different without Facebook and other forms of SNS-mediated augmentations.

1. Overall attitude toward Facebook and social media

Seven of the eight participants joined Facebook between 2006 and 2008, most of them citing exigencies connected to graduate school. They were often curious about the then-new and much-buzzed-about website, but all seven said their earliest uses were specifically related to graduate school. The outlier here was Veronica, a doctoral candidate who joined in 2004 as an undergraduate, because, as she said, it was "what college students were doing" that year.

All eight participants described Facebook and social media as important and valuable spaces for connecting to others in ways relevant to their graduate studies, though not all of them were entirely positive about those experiences. Caitlin, a PhD candidate in composition, described a sort of love-hate relationship with the site that readers will no doubt find familiar.

The rest of the participants in the study described social media in largely positive terms, playing roles in classroom, development, and social realms. Steve, a Ph.D. student in English, described the way that social networking sites vitally mediated every aspect of his education: "As a distance student, social media (FB) plays a role in most of my academic interactions, including workshops and professional development opportunities. They are used instrumentally and transformationally." Claire noted that "Talking to (or seeing posts and comments from) other folks in academia--whether professors in my field, profs in my program, recent graduates, or ABD folks in the trenches is so helpful, satisfying, enjoyable."

Some participants commented on the fragmentary, tangential way of making connections that social networking sites allowed. For Dave, a graduate from a hybrid

program in technical communication, social media provided him with "a short glimpse of belonging" that supported him as he built relationships and became engaged in the community of his graduate program. Robert, a graduate of a composition and rhetoric program, referred to "overlapping points of connection":

> A post to listserv leads to email contact, yields a Facebook friendship, leads to a conference proposal; a friendship f2f [face-to-face] with someone who moves away leads to a Facebook series of message that provide friendship reinforcement. I use it to maintain and create connections with people of interest to me. (Robert)

Caitlin was the only person interviewed that reported strong negative feelings about Facebook professionalization. For her, there was a powerful tension in Facebook use:

> It [Facebook] makes me feel more depressed and anxious and unworthy than I already do because I realize that people post pictures and info about things they are doing that are exceptional … and I haven't taken a vacation in 8 [years]. (Caitlin)

Although the site provided vital augmentations for her academic life, helped her research agenda, and enhanced her feeling of connectedness to the discipline, it often made her incredibly anxious about her social life.

2. Graduate purposes for Facebook

Professional development activity is important for graduate students. As Leon and Pigg noted, "Seemingly disparate objects and activities have to be connected in order for people to learn what it means to do the work of participating in academic communities" (2011, p. 3). This kind of activity is mediated in significant ways by social media networks.

In large part, interviewees described the most important benefit of Facebook in the general terms of networking with others, both inside and beyond their academic programs. Community-building and, for some students, discovering professional mentors, were central activities. Participants from fully online and hybrid commonly described taking an active role in building relationships with members of their cohort and program via sites like Facebook, and through email lists and other media in order to have interaction. Participants in online programs described social media networks as avenues for emotional affirmation and support more often than those in face-to-face programs. Interviewees were also asked about using social networking sites as backchannels: non-sanctioned conversations about an organized activity in a secondary, synchronous channel, such as an unofficial chat in which a group of students can comment on a course during class meetings without the knowledge of

the instructor. Among this group, there was no reported backchanneling for courses, and only limited SNS use at conferences. (Expectations around participating in official and quasi-official conference backchannel communication, such as conference Twitter hashtags, have grown rapidly since this study took place.)

For participants from all kinds of programs, Facebook played a role in the research process. Jason referred to this role as "bootstrapping [himself] into a research agenda." Facebook provided a good space to ask a question about a new area or what kind of existing research would be a good place to begin and gather responses, citations, and direction from professionals across the network. For Caitlin, Facebook was important as a research site; she used groups to recruit participants, gather data, and maintain relationships related to her agenda.

A common thread for participants from online programs was that social networking sites "circumscribed [their] graduate experience." The site facilitated all types of interactions, including professional development, working with professors and committee members, and connecting with mentors. As Steve noted,

> I am fully and enthusiastically mediated by these (and other) socially networked technologies. Facebook has been vital to community building, both personal and academic/professional. Without FB, I would be having a very different experience. In fact, I probably would not have stayed in the program as a distance student without it. (Steve)

This productive role—and in particular Facebook's role in staying in the program—was also noted by Jason: "I COULD NOT have completed the degree without that online interaction. We relied on each other, we were always there, we were always sharing ideas, brainstorming, etc." Claire, a student in a hybrid program who identified strongly with fully online students, called Facebook a "lifeline" for online students, in particular for "ABD folks in the trenches." For her and Jason in particular, Facebook provided mediation for writing groups, creativity, and productivity as well as being the major way to really know their fellow online students as whole people with interests, sense of humor. While both online and face-to-face students noted that they would not be able to imagine their graduate education without these mediated networks, online students had the clearest sense of how their experiences might have been different.

While online students used social media to connect with colleagues and faculty within their programs, traditional students established and maintained relationships beyond the boundaries of their program. They found the tool advantageous for forming distant writing groups and finding mentors, especially in the difficult transition from graduate student to first-year professors. While he was in his program, Robert interacted with committee members and other students through Facebook, but put much more value on distant (and persistent) networking:

> Online, the most important interactions have been with other grad students

> from other places who I knew and interacted with mostly through Facebook. Some of these relationships persisted in interesting ways post-grad school. For example, a group of folks that match this description have been a part of a writing group we formed a year ago as the five of us were beginning our first year in assistant prof gigs. (Robert)

Facebook also provided the opportunity to see shared experiences with graduate students and young professionals outside of the home program. As Veronica noted:

> I've also become friends with some relatively new academics (people that are like 1-2 years out of grad school) and they are awesome sources of news, support, and encouragement. So that's something that's fun as well. (Veronica)

Caitlin described mentoring as a particular area for her, both as a teacher and as a scholar. While her mentors at her university were "amazing," she also took advantage of being allowed to "'stalk' people with research interests and jobs I really want." Whether seeking participation in an academic community (rather than solely social interaction with friends) or networking beyond the boundaries of specific academic programs, Facebook was valuable for the connective work of professionalizing.

3. Professionalism "in vivo"

A common theme in the literature on social networking sites and professionalization is access to interactions with professionals: what Claire called "grown up" academics. Just as *in vivo* coding analyzes discourse "out of life" and works from a participant's own terms to create meaning, social networking sites allowed participants to observe and engage with professionals mediated by the everyday text of Facebook. Rather than attending professional development sessions, social networking sites allowed graduate students to watch and experiment with "being professional." The "potential of interacting with important scholars" (Coad, 2017 p. 58) is one of the important motivating features for graduate students to curate an online presence, and this sort of interaction is the basis for much advice about how to construct and maintain one's profile online (Buck, 2012; Faris & Moore, 2016). This theme emerged in interviews: Dave compared social networking sites to "a letter of introduction" while Caitlin cited Facebook's welcoming power as a powerful advantage:

> I didn't know that I could discuss scholars' arguments with them but Facebook opens the door to correspondence, maybe like seeing these people at conferences also does, but I was never able to approach a speaker after a conference presentation. I felt like they would be too tired. (Caitlin)

The speed and openness of this access was valuable too, as Jason points out:

> FB broadened my view of TC [technical communication] by allowing me to quickly become friends—not using scare quotes—with other folks in the field. Since we're all such digital people, I think TCers tend to not care so much about whether a person is a f2f friend or an online friend. (Jason)

Another particular affordance of social networking sites is that its users "gain access to existing communities of practice" (Pigg 2014, p. 70). Caitlin applied this strategy to her own writing, turning her network into a teacher: "I didn't know I could ask a captive group of writing studies scholar-teachers about writing strategies, for example but Facebook allowed me to do that."

Communities of practice become not just accessible, but visible, allowing users to observe the field as a field, to note norms for behavior: not cute advice about how much to drink (or not) at conferences, but larger questions about how to handle job markets or tenure processes. These networks provide access to who is working on what well before publications and proceedings come out—networks and relations within fields and subfields become present in conversation threads rather than just citation chains. Social networking sites, according to boyd and Ellison, "enable users to articulate and make visible their social networks" (2007, p. 211). Dave, for example, pointed out that Facebook gave him much the same opportunity as being in the room with people in the field. Facebook gave him:

> The ability to watch, observe, and interact with people digitally as a means to support and enhance my understanding of the implicit aspects of professionalization—the way people are and were and treated each other. [...] by being able to see—transparency again—their professional and social networks, I was able to analyze and understand more about how the academic system worked AS A SYSTEM and then adapt myself to that. apply the rules myself. (Dave)

Veronica, a face-to-face student, noted that she attempted to adopt Facebook with her graduate cohort, but the group did not last. Her Facebook interactions with people in her program were limited to vaguely social interactions. For her, the real value was connecting with other graduate students met at conference workshops or with faculty scholars from other programs:

> It's funny because when my cohort started, I created a Facebook group for us that we interacted on regularly. It died out after the first year. It's still there, but no one pays attention to it anymore. I interact with other students who are in my program, but it's mainly liking their pictures and making jokes about more personal posts. I interact more as a professional with students from other schools than I do with students in my program. (Veronica)

Veronica continues, commenting on the value of Facebook for seeing beyond her program: "I don't know that sporadic conference meetings would have given me the same view of the field and be able to engage with other people in the same way that Facebook has." This "view of the field" sense was noted nearly universally in this group of participants, and seemed especially practical to Jason, who pointed out that one can easily trace the route from Facebook conversation to being "gently shoved" into productive work:

> I've used FB to keep up with what folks are presenting at conferences. Did you see Cheryl Ball's posts about the dig humanities conf she was at? Or maybe it was qual/quant research. At any rate, she was reminding me of some of Geisler's work, which reminded me of Charney, which reminded me. . .you know, that kind of gentle shove you need to keep researching, or keep thinking until you revise your research question. I'd call that professionalization. The "push," as it were, to continue in the professional track of being a scholar. (Jason)

Rene was an important outlier in this study. At the time a candidate in a technical communication program, she repeated a number of times that for her Facebook was a social tool, not a professional tool. She agreed that Facebook and social networking sites in general—especially LinkedIn—could support professional interactions, but pointed out that "there is nothing to replace the impromptu water cooler chats that occur if you are face to face." Rene was unusual among this group of participants in that she primarily identified herself as an industry professional seeking academic credentials rather than as an academic professional. Her bias towards LinkedIn is reflected in recent studies of social media and technical writing. Lauren and Pigg point out that while LinkedIn, Twitter, and blogs are crucial spaces for knowledge sharing and professional conversations among technical communication professionals, academics do not value such spaces and are not present in them (Lauren & Pigg, 2016, p. 309). That is, Rene reminds us that this academic/practitioner divide, familiar to readers from technical communication literature, extends beyond knowledge flow networks and into the mixed social and professional space of social networking.

4. Tension between personal and professional persona on Facebook

Of the eight participants in this study, only three described a particular tension or desire to keep their personal and professional lives separate. Dave explained that for him, although he did mix the two worlds on Facebook, his use was largely personal and he felt an awkward professional tension ("I have to pretend to be professional") to avoid cursing and be hypersensitive to audience, especially because his posts might enter the workplace. Still, this sort of ambient awareness was useful, as social media

provide information about moods and emotional states that equipped him for face-to-face interaction. Robert described how it took him a little time to reconcile the "mixed audience of professionals and parents." Yet, neither of these individuals betrayed a sense of guilt surrounding their social media habits.

Rene was the only participant who desired a strong separation between personal and professional networks. For her Facebook was specifically about socializing rather than working; she described LinkedIn as more appropriate for the professional connecting she does as a consultant: "I've tried to use it [Facebook] for my companies but don't really want the "closeness" to my work life that would ensue...I really just want to use FB to keep in touch on a personal level with my friends and colleagues (minimal work talk)." Despite this desire for separation, Rene seemed pragmatic about context collapse, noting that as much as professionals may desire to keep the two worlds separate, "Pandora's box" had already been opened; ultimately, she did not think the separation entirely possible.

Caitlin mentioned a strong sense of guilt about personal use of social media: "I may have told myself I was doing research or getting mentored but instead I was really just Facebooking." She described an ambivalent relationship with Facebook, both relying on it heavily to recruit and interact with her own research participants and experiencing intense depression and anxiety about seeing the "exceptional" things that others in her network were doing. Participating in what she calls the "down the rabbit hole" activity of observing activities of friends and family was, Caitlin claimed, a huge time-waster. Like Leon and Pigg's participants, she saw the ways that social media is essential to her professionalization, but she also felt anxiety about how Facebook seemed to blur personal and professional activity.

Few other participants mentioned such a tension when asked about it explicitly and described how even though social media use might largely be focused on academic life rather than their personal life (or vice versa), they generally felt free to be their whole selves on social media. In fact, some of them described the personalizing effect that social media had for their understanding of academic and professional communities; Robert pointed out that without these connections, he would not have had such a good sense of the "human-ness behind many people who make [up] the discipline." For most of the interviewees in this study, the blending of social and academic lives is a productive—and welcome—one.

Discussion

Though not generally a sponsored or organized on the part of university programs, social networking sites played a valued and practical role in the lives and learning of these graduate students. Along with social purposes such as creating a sense of connectedness and a shared experience through backchannel communication, these graduate students also used social media to visualize and participate in professional networks. In this section, I briefly return to three important areas the interview findings addressed: 1) social networking sites provide mediated access to professional

life; 2) users of social networking sites have become comfortable with (or at least used to) collapsed professional and personal contexts; and 3) social networking sites can play an especially valuable role in graduate distance education.

Similar to the graduate students Leon and Pigg (2011) wrote about, the graduate students in this study used Facebook as a tool to gain personal and professional agency. Graduate students used social networking to guide themselves or be guided into professional lives and to get a realistic sense of how personal and professional mix in and beyond their academic programs. These activities were especially valued by students in online programs.

Accessing professional lives

So, what social, educational, and professional roles do digital social networks play for graduate students, both in traditional residential programs and fully online and low-residency programs? In both online and residential programs, the graduate students in this study used social networks and other technologies to guide themselves into their professional lives. Backchanneling and collaborating on program coursework and networking to find collaborators existed alongside activities such as visualizing communities of practice, finding mentors, and becoming "friends" with the field.

In writing studies, previous scholarship about professionalism has been attentive to the roles that technology and online spaces play in professional life, foregrounding the role of digital work, social networks and multiliteracies and often invoking "the digital" broadly as a set of skills, tools, or competencies graduate students must learn in order to become part of the 21st century professoriate (Selber, 2004; Cohen, 2010; Kolowich, 2010). Other work has emphasized mentorship in producing digital research, calling for graduate programs to recognize the importance of technology skills and an "integrative approach" to professionalization (p. 15). This attention to revising the traditional role of technology in graduate education (Goggin & Boyd, 2009) has been framed variously as remediation (Graupner et al., 2009), remixing (Yancey, 2009), and responsivity (Knievel & Sheridan-Rabideau, 2009). Yancey's remix model for graduate education, for example, emphasized refocusing curricula and learning spaces around technology and materiality. This and other discussions tend, however, to talk about their technologies as tools related to producing research or teaching, rather than as tools for mediating, producing, and accessing professional lives.

Among many other affordances of social networking sites, Spinuzzi (2007) pointed out their particular value for networking and relationship-building "across work activities that have traditionally been separated by temporal, spatial, or disciplinary boundaries" (p. 268). Those informal moments and opportunities to eavesdrop or observe once depended on being co-located but are now accessible through Facebook and other social media. As Claire said, she got to "[see]

professionalism modeled *in vivo*." Professional life and relationships can be seen in full, even by people separated by distance. In fact, when describing the professionalization opportunities afforded by social networking sites, nearly all participants turned metaphors related to physical, often interior settings and physical interactions: opened doors, gentle shoves, landscapes and feeling like "being in the room." Online students were able to have mediated versions of those random hallway experiences and professional moments with their faculty and colleagues within the program, while both online and face-to-face students were able to augment these in-program moments by reaching beyond the program to mentors, faculty, and students at other schools.

Mixing professional with personal

One issue raised by thinking about professional use of Facebook in particular (as opposed to LinkedIn, an explicitly professional service) is how it intrudes on our conception of Facebook as a primarily social toy. While mixing the social and the professional is a risk, for the graduate students in this study the benefits of being able to see and interact with professionals as whole people made the risk worth taking: they were able to get humanized views of professional life.

One of Leon and Pigg's findings was that graduate students experienced considerable anxiety about acting scholarly in their online lives. For the two students they studied, the virtual "blank page" of the open document signified a work space, while social media seemed mostly disruptive, a "fun" space for "playing around" that also incited feelings of guilt (p. 11). Their graduate writers experienced not only blurred boundaries around writing events, but also blurred lines between personal and professional lives online, which resulted for them in a strong sense of tension between personal and professional personae. This context collapse—the convergence of different, once separate spheres of life on social media—is something scholars are only beginning to understand. Similar to Leon and Pigg's discussion, Faris and Moore (2017) described emerging scholars' feelings of anxiety about acting professional on social media in terms of their struggles with context collapse.

The graduate students in this study felt some of this tension; Dave and Renee in particular felt awkward in mixing the two—Dave because he felt like being himself might potentially damage his ethos as a graduate student, and Renee because as a consultant she felt that business and personal spheres should remain somewhat distinct. However, all of the participants in this study shared that they thought professional and social benefits were too valuable to miss entirely. While it would be difficult to advise everyone to embrace a rich blend of professional and personal networks, the mixture can be rewarding.

Social networking for distance education

Do digital social networks help mitigate the physical gap produced by distance

graduate education? The responses in this study clarified many education-related purposes for social networks that went beyond course-based uses like mediating reading discussions or project-based collaborations. The participants from distance programs were, as a group, the most optimistic about the benefits of wide adoption of social networking sites in their graduate programs, especially for feeling connected and enculturated as professionals in their programs. Every one of the participants in this group emphasized that social media kept them connected to and successful in their program.

Professionalization depends to some extent on organized training, but it extends beyond the classroom: the impromptu, ambient, tacit experiences afforded in co-located spaces. Such experiences—generally provided in graduate school by residence requirements—not only reinforce the norms, expectations, and behaviors of disciplines, but also enculturate graduate students by giving them a space in which to interact with, model, and establish relationships with professional academics. Residential education—and thus the residence requirement—has traditionally provided a "rich and empowering learning experience" (Inman & Corrigan, 2001) where graduate students can master the "less-often-articulated professionalizing tasks" (Leon & Pigg, 2011, p. 4) of establishing and sustaining relationships with peers, collaborators, and mentors. Students in distance programs (but indeed students in all kinds of graduate programs) are a heterogeneous group, with varying levels of preparedness and pre-socialization into an academic life. Digital social networks are spaces that can mitigate the kinds of physical and cultural gaps inherent to distance education—in particular distance graduate education.

Conclusion

Despite occasional ambivalence about social and rhetorical activities on Facebook and other social networking sites, the participants in this study remained optimistic about its role in professional lives. For these doctoral students, both online and off, social networking played a significant role in helping them feel engaged and part of the culture of their programs and, ultimately, their scholarly discipline.

My point is not to oversell Facebook; an entire ecology of media, sites, and tools surrounded the participants in this study: Twitter, email lists, Ning sites, course wikis, and other tools also filled the experiences these participants described. While social networks cannot "automatically enhance" learning and "equalize all environments and student positions" (Turnley, 2009, p. 88), these technologies are an important resource and tool for professionalization. The question should not be which modality is better, but rather how those modalities offer different resources. Technologies have affordances, but they are not transparent, and educators should also be aware of the ways a technology might exclude students. We must also remember that these sites are not learning environments but platforms for businesses with corporate interests at their center that may compete with the goals and ethics of

distance education. Finally, even if they're not outright against it, some learners and scholars have deep reservations about the substantiality of doing scholarship with social media. This practice has become more accepted in writing studies and other fields but is still an activity at the margins of scholarly discourse. Still, there is a growing sense that social media and social networking sites offer instructors "exceptional opportunities to model for students how networks facilitate work" (Vie, 2017, p.2)

Professionalizing online is not an activity exclusive to Facebook: LinkedIn and Twitter are both considered much more serious and professional spaces for connecting with colleagues and professionals in many industries (Lauren & Pigg, 2016; Vie, 2017). The community around the #womeninTC Twitter hashtag prides itself on distributing professional resources and connecting new professionals with mentors. Neither is this activity especially new; LISTSERVs have long been digital spaces for maintaining professional contact. WPA-L, the Writing Program Administrators' LISTSERV, has been an important social and professional network to its users since 1991: not just a valuable communication space, but a source for ideas about contemporary issues, assistance for isolated teachers and administrators, and resources for enriching teaching, administration, and scholarship. Implicit in the list users' regular requests for sources, recommendations, and lines of argument for new faculty positions is a high esteem for the community's collective knowledge and ethos. While Facebook enabled the professionalization for participants in this study, the WPA-L is a social network that offers not only research resources but also the opportunity for newcomers to connect with established academics. Because of their mediated, visible nature, social networks have reach and longevity as useful professional tools.

Finally, as Inman and Corrigan (2001) claimed, "the challenges […] of distance education are substantial" for graduate programs and their students (p. 414). Using digital social media to augment distance graduate work may help us answer those challenges. In traditional residential programs, there may still be space for ambivalence about digital and social media, because they may still remain secondary to the face-to-face experience of hallways and offices and coffee shops. As writing educators move past seeing social media as a fad (Vie 2017), the space for this ambivalence will continue to become increasingly smaller. In distance settings, these media become primary places of interaction, such that student and educator ambivalence can get in the way of building those scholarly communities and minding that gap of face-to-face tacit experience. Facebook or LinkedIn do not make for better graduate students or better researchers any more than subscribing to email LISTSERVs necessarily makes one any better of a writing teacher—but, in the overall landscape of institutional change, we find ourselves in and as distance graduate education continues to spread, what these media *can* do is let graduate students see professionals in action when they cannot be seen from down the hall.

Appendix A: Semi-structured interview script

At the beginning of each interview, post the following informed consent message:

> *Before we begin the interview, I need to supply you with informed consent materials (see attachment). Please let me know when you have finished reading and if you have any questions. If you type the words "I give my consent," it means that you have read the materials and that all questions were answered to your satisfaction.*
>
> *The interview has three sections. I'll post the questions from each section, and you can respond to them as we go; although questions are numbered, you don't have to number your responses or anything. Take as much time as you need—I'm in no hurry. And don't worry too much about typos, if you can. :)*

Section A: Basic information. The following questions have to do with your general context and experiences with social media.

1. What graduate degree you are seeking/have sought? In what field or discipline?
    a. Traditional, hybrid, or distance program?
2. Do you currently hold an academic or other professional position, such as:
    a. Graduate teaching or research assistant?
    b. Full or part-time faculty?
    c. Tenure-track or non tenure-track?
    d. Academic non-teaching?
    e. Work outside the academy?
3. What kinds of social media or social networking sites do you use?
    a. (Follow-up questions to help prompt discussion, if stalled)
        i. Do you use social networking sites (SNS), such as Facebook or Google +?
        ii. Microblogging services, such as Twitter or Tumblr?
        iii. Other social media, such as Instagram or Pinterest?
        iv. Do you maintain a blog?
        v. Do you participate in adding content to wikis?
        vi. Do you subscribe to and/or participate in any LISTSERVS?
4. For what do you generally use social media on a daily basis? Could you describe your use of SNSes like Facebook more specifically?
5. To the best of your memory, when and why did you get an account on Facebook?
6. Overall, what is your attitude toward social media, and in particular, about social networking sites like Facebook?

Section B: Graduate education and professionalization. The following questions have to do with your general experiences as a graduate student with professionalization and enculturation.

Definition, if requested by participant:

> *Professionalization is often understood as "the development of skills, identities, norms, and values associated with becoming part of a professional group. Through this process, recruits [. . .] acquire both substantive and methodological knowledge and develop understandings of their roles that permit them to function as professionals in these fields. Also, by training newcomers, [. . .] professions seek to ensure that the work of [the group] will continue congruent with certain principles and practices." (http://www.mla.org/professionalization)*

7. To what extent do you (or did you) feel a pressure to professionalize as a graduate student?
8. How did you manage this pressure? I.e. were there professional development workshops and seminars that you took advantage of? Webinars? Were these at your institution, or at conferences? Formal or informal groups?
9. What roles have social media—in particular Facebook—played in your professionalization?
    a. *(Prompt, if necessary)* What are some examples of how you've deployed social media to engage in professionalizing behaviors?
    b. *(Prompt, if necessary)* Can you think of any examples of how social media has had a negative impact on your professionalizing behaviors?
    c. Can you imagine graduate school without Facebook? Your early professional experience and your transition from one to the other?

Section C: Graduate education and enculturation: The following questions ask you to reflect on the mediated nature of relationships with other students, with faculty within your graduate program, and with disciplinary professionals outside of your graduate program.

10. How much engagement would you say you have or had with other graduate students in your program? With faculty? How critical would you say that engagement was to your success in or feelings of belonging to the program?
11. Did/do you ever feel a sense of isolation related to your experiences as a student?
12. Outside of the classroom, what have been some of the most important social interactions of your graduate school experience?
13. What role has Facebook played in your graduate instruction (or learning to be an academic) in general?
    a. *(If participant has graduated)* What about in your post-graduate professional experience?
14. Do you (or would you) include social media activity on vitae and research statements?
15. If you attend professional conferences, do you participate in social media activities like backchannels or conference hashtag conversations?

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